

# The Artistic Impact of the Reda Troupe

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## Mahmoud Reda's Teaching Method



It is well known that many countries in the world have their own established theater dance traditions. In the West and the United States, for example, there has been for decades, different genres of theatrical dance traditions. For example, when a certain dance ensemble or a new Broadway show announces the need for dancers, hundreds of already talented and well-trained dancers would apply with the hope of getting a chance at being part of these famous dance ensembles or musicals. After long hours of grueling auditions only a few are chosen in the long run.

How different our experience was. The idea of forming a dance group for the theater was a completely new concept. At the very beginning, our first members were not professional dancers. They did, nevertheless, have some movement coordination. Some had practiced different sports, and others had previously performed in various mishmash dance scenes in Egyptian films. Most of these members were students in high school, university or the physical training collage. They projected to their Egyptian audience the verve of youthful energy and a joyful spirit. This in turn was received with a welcoming appreciation.

As the Reda troupe gained popularity, the number of both young men and women who joined the Troupe increased. The repertoire of dances grew and a new and unique dance idiom was emerging. The choreographies of Mahmoud Reda displayed a genre that embraced many styles and a vocabulary of related movements was accumulating.

By 1964, Mahmoud Reda had developed a unique teaching method. The syllabus he used helped speed up the process of preparing and promoting the dancing skills of his dancers in our singular style. This teaching method was to enhance the proficiency of his performing members and physically prepare newcomers before they were taught dances from the repertoire

Classes were divided into beginners and advanced for women and the same for men. All classes adhered to the same teaching process. However, beginners were eased into the movement process with a simpler and less sophisticated dance combinations. Prospective members had to be physically disciplined and prepared in the different styles of the Reda Troupe (Egyptian women, charmingly, are prone to have a free, individualistic and unrestrained aptitude when they dance). Training was aimed at molding and polishing the dancers as they learned the Reda Technique. If any dancer showed potential, he or she would be upgraded to the advanced class.

## Example of an advanced class

All movements and steps were segmented, codified and all the possible variations were extracted then developed into warm up exercises and various routines. While exercises for men and women differed greatly in movement content, they followed the same format and rhythmic patterns. Classes were always accompanied by the **tabla** (drum). Rhythms were: 8/8 **Tawil**, 8/4 **Maqsum**, 8/4 **Masmudi**, 5/8 **Khamsa 'ala Thamaniyah**, 6/8 **Sittah 'ala Thamaniyah**, 7/8 **Sab'ah 'ala Thamaniyah**, 9/8 **Tis'ah 'ala Thamaniyah**, 10/8 **Sama'l Thaqil**. Exercises were executed either to a recurring single rhythm or to a succession of more than one rhythmic pattern. The tempos used are slow, moderate, and fast.

**Movement Characteristics:** The predominant stance and posture of women is Neutral erect - that is upright but relaxed. The most articulate parts of the body are bound and sustained. The predominant stance and posture of men is upright and slightly rigid. The most articulate parts of the body, again, are bound and sustained, which has often been referred to as graceful yet with the rigid posture, also masculine. All exercises retained the elements found in our new dance idiom.

## Warm Ups and Training Routines for Female Dancers

**1) Arm Movements For Women:** Special attention was given to typical arm movements in the various styles in our theatrical genre for near, medium, and far reach were identified then used in warm ups, first in a stationary position, then their relationship to different movements to the body determined and developed into exercises. New ways of undulating and the swaying of the arms as the dancers progressed in space were also developed.

**2) Torso and Hip Movements:** included, pelvic shifts, tilts and oscillations, as well as, undulations in the horizontal and vertical planes. All the movements were segmented and variations were determined then included into exercises independently or sequentially to other movements. The difference between swings and thrusts were defined, then the directions they took were noted (horizontal, vertical, or circular). Also established, was the distribution of weight, and how it shifted during the execution of various movements. This methodical approach to movement helped in refining the manner of their execution.

### Example of typical movements that were Refined and Developed:

#### **Pelvic oscillations that were differentiated, segmented and codified**

What the West calls “hip shimmies” is an example of movement patterns that were identified and fragmented into parts, then each was isolated. In this way, the manner in which each part is executed and what initiated its motion was determined.

**A)** There was the rural style that was executed with both knees slightly bent. In this style of shimmy the pelvis initiates the movement in a side-to-side oscillation with a slight swing, while the buttocks remains relaxed, reacting to the action of the pelvis.

**B)** Another style of shimmy that was taught in class was where the posture of the body was in an upright position with relaxed knees. The knees are the initiators of the movement. Each knee is slightly bent forward then brought back to normal stance alternatively with the other knee in the same tempo, creating a slight front-back oscillation. The pelvis remains neutral reacting to the action of the knees. The tempo started slow, medium then fast.

**C)** Another example of pelvic oscillations is specific to the Haggalah (the name of a professional dancer and the dance event, but not the movement). The oscillating of the pelvis is in the vertical plane. The counts and mechanics of the movement was segmented and a technique of teaching was established. Learning the movement was through training in slow and moderate tempos. A particular attention was paid to the different qualities of shifting of weight.

#### **4) The introduction of Turns:**

Classes for beginners dealt with teaching the proper technique and the fundamentals of the executing types of turns, such as, travelling turns, pivots, swivels and twirling etc. In the advanced class, all types of turns were merged with different movements of the body both in stationary positions and travelling steps. Many of the turns retained the quality and style of our dance idiom. They were then molded and integrated into the ever -growing movement syllabus.

#### **5) Transit and Locomotive Steps:**

Advanced classes included recurrent movement combinations that include either sequential or simultaneous movement of the body. These combinations were executed while traversing space in front, back or sideway progressions. They were executed to moderate and fast tempos. Their purpose was to introduce the dancers to the dynamics of certain movements found in the various styles in this genre. The order of the movement content and the introduction of new variations always changed in class. This was to keep the dancers always alert and speed up their learning capabilities.

#### **6) Introduction of the Releve:**

The use of releve was introduced to many movements. For example, movements resembling low extension arabesques, most of the turns, and during the execution of vertically inclined hip movements. This use of releve produced a vertical quality, and a new dynamic to many movements.

### **Warm ups and Training Routines for Male dancers**

All movement processes retained the Reda style of dance.

**1)** Warm ups began with stationary movements such as various degrees of knee bends, and the flexion and extension of knees and ankles. Knee lifts at various angles to the body were included, either sequentially or simultaneously, with wide stance movements such as, side-to-side and front to back shifts of weights. The tempo used was slow then medium.

2) Locomotive and transit steps, such as, sliding steps, cross-overs, front and back progression were included. Skips, hops, and jumps; pivots, swivels; travelling and aerial-turns ended with different types of kneeling and squatting positions.

These classes were not limited to teaching and training the dancers, but also shaped and tutored the dancers in the disciplines and rules of the stage. By the early 1970s, the Reda Troupe had formed a generation of diligent and competent dancers who were in command of their skills.

### **Final Note: The Sadness in my Heart concerning the deterioration of Mahmoud Reda's Legacy**

With a sad, frustrated and disheartened note, I must point out that Mahmoud Reda had envisioned that his successors would continue his teaching tradition. However, since 1990 the Reda Troupe has been left mostly in the hands of undiscerning supervisors, compromising the creativity, artistic discipline and integrity Mahmoud had worked so hard to develop. They were unable to bring the same energy and commitment to Mahmoud's thoroughly conceived and well-constructed dance troupe. Consequently, in the hands of these "supervisors", Mahmoud Reda's dynamic training method, along with other aspects deteriorated with the passing of years.

Today, I personally feel that the modern troupe choreographies have not maintained the high ideals the original troupe strived for. Dances that included large numbers of well-trained dancers, is now performed by a very small number of members of seemingly mismatched levels. The Orchestra, that once was composed of eighty of the best musicians in Egypt, is now small and unimpressive. Costumes have lost the careful craftsmanship and quality we were so proud of, and even the colors and designs have been compromised. The performances seem to have lost their youthful freshness and joie de vivre our troupe enjoyed at every show. I feel the artistic vision we poured our lives into has dissipated, and it is a shame - culturally, artistically and creatively, as there was a wonderful chance to develop the troupe from its strong artistic foundations. Thank goodness for the dedicated artists overseas who strive to maintain the integrity of the original Reda troupe, and continue to educate themselves on the real history of the troupe, Mahmoud Reda's teaching methods and stagecraft, and aim to perform with artistic integrity and respect, to honor his legacy.

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